

INTRODUCTION

What is the "Anima Sola"?

And--what does she mean to me?

A popular subject for 17th and 18th century religious paintings in Mexico was souls in Purgatory: I remember seeing them in several churches in Guanajuato, both as huge imposing oil-paintings and the popular offerings painted on little sheets of tin called "retablos" or "milagros" (miracles). They show Christ majestically enthroned above a sea of flames, in which a number of human heads are visible: Kings, Bishops, Captains, Princes, even a Pope or two (all identified by their headgear) representing the sins of Avarice, Pride, Envy, Anger, etc. The only unadorned head is also that of the only female figure, who raises her bare arms toward Jesus. She is said to represent Lust: the notion deeply embedded in the last 1500 years of Judeo-Christianity that the female anatomy is sinful and dangerous in itself, since it is the apparent cause of Lust in men. Why is she the only female in Purgatory? Obviously because her sin was just that: being female.

I first saw her close-up on the back of a Leonard Cohen record-album in the late '60's: a naked woman clothed in flames, hair becomingly loose on shoulders, patient eyes and shackled wrists beseechingly raised Heavenward. The image struck hard and stuck--some deep resonance, something profoundly recognisable, and recognised. It expressed exactly some facet of the way I had been feeling for a long, long time. I searched the picture carefully for further information and found none; I still did not know her name.

Several years later a dear friend, returning from the Guatemalan Highlands, presented me with a chromo of the same picture, crudely framed in glass and crimped

tin, identified with the words "La Bendita Anima Sola". My friend had discovered it among the religious artifacts spread out for sale in front of an old Quiché Maya lady on the steps of the church in Chichicastenango, and bought it "because you're always talking about the Anima * so I knew it was for you."

It certainly was: I knew her at last. "Anima Sola"! The(female)Soul Alone: immobilised and suffering in the purifying (?) fires of Purgatory, trapped by a theological doctrine which defines the female of our species as some sort of inferior function of the male, and specifically prohibits original activity on her part. As a 'Good Woman' she is expiating the Sin of Eve, and believes that her duty is to suffer--in silence, if possible--and wait patiently for redemption at the time it pleases her Lord and Master, her Saviour (always male: therefore by definition some 'Other') to release her. She must never try to free herself. I seemed to hear her sweet sad voice, decorously pitched, high and helpless as a child's: "Won't somebody please get me out of here???" The proper maiden waits faithfully for rescue by Him--whoever He may be.

In the city of Oaxaca, in 1973, I saw the Anima Sola set up like a Saint, in the temple of Our Lady of Solitude. She was located on the right side of the altar, atop a plain scarred wooden kitchen-table (!), a life-sized plaster bust rising from scarlet plaster flames, with bright blue glass eyes, real eyelashes, and real iron cuffs on her lifted wrists, linked by a heavy and very rusty real iron chain. In the niches of the many other Saints in the church there were one or two feeble little flames twinkling away. Around the Anima Sola was a luminous forest of burning votive candles. She does not represent any particular martyr or saint (what would a proper Saint be doing in Purgatory?) but rather the

* as in "Anima" and "Animus", in the work of Dr. C.G.Jung

"Blessed Soul" serving its time there, as all must. Her candles are lit by believers who request her aid and comfort for their own recently dead; the people clustered on their knees in front of her table were all Indians.

The last time I was there (in 1976, after the International Women's Year UN Conference--which is another story--) she was gone. When I inquired of the priest what had happened to her, he replied that she had been removed to the storage room, and would later be installed in the museum.

Was she becoming too popular? Was business too good? Did some Church Father suddenly sniff the danger in respectful prayers being offered to the image of a naked woman--and a burning one, at that? Quién sabe.

And although she bears a marked resemblance to Titian's magnificently sensuous "Penitent Mary Magdalene" richly clothed only in her own flowing hair (the arm--and-eyes-raised gesture is identical) the major difference is in the quality of the art-work: the Anima Sola, at least all those I have seen, is depressingly bottom-drawer. However, she always occupies a prominent position in my work-room.

I see her as the image of my own senseless suffering through the years of struggle to cram my unruly, creatively fermenting artist-self into the tidy corsetry of the Good Wife and Mother. Always hoping dimly for some future rescue and/or reward, I relentlessly distorted myself to the definitions I was conditioned to believe in, that is to say--

1) A Good Woman: who never thinks of (or for) herself, because she has no Self to think about.

2) A Good Wife: who must be doggedly faithful to her husband even though he gives her nothing to be faithful to.

3) A Good Mother: who cheerfully and indefinitely

Postpones her own BEING (personal needs and growth, creativity, inner realities and Life) in favor of the needs of her children.

and, possibly most pernicious of all,

4) A Perfect Lady: who is unfailingly gentle, courteous, soft-spoken, considerate, demure, modest, reasonable, and "NICE".

She is also there to remind me that no one else is going to "get me out of here"--i.e., arrive magically to my rescue, and free me from the painful limitations of my: sex

age

female conditioning

economic, physical, or psychic circumstances

and/or peculiar collection of neuroses.

I will just have to

do it

for

myself.